

ON TRACK WITH MDT

On Monday, February 24, MDT announced a change in our deicing practices: instead of anti-icing, or applying de-icer in anticipation of a winter storm event, we are now doing just-in-time applications, where we wait for an event to materialize before applying de-icer.

The reason for the change is simple: weather forecasts have proven to be less accurate than desired, and we found that we were applying de-icer in anticipation of events that never materialized. Making this change will help us 1) apply less product to our roads, and 2) utilize the products we do apply more effectively, which will improve our bottom line. Moreover, we have been able to address public concern about the safety of our de-icer by letting them know that mag chloride is not hazardous to their health.

As many of you know, the safety of the traveling public is of utmost importance to MDT, and we are constantly striving to improve our practices in light of increased traffic and environmental concerns. We occasionally have folks ask why we don't "go back to what we did 50 years ago," and the reasons are simple. In 1966, the annual vehicle miles of travel (VMT) in Montana was 3,838 million vehicle miles; in 2001, it was 10,011 million vehicle miles. That means that the number of miles people travel here has more than doubled, which equates to increased risk if our roads aren't properly maintained. Research from across the country has shown that even a minimal amount of traffic blows abrasives off the road, rendering them ineffective.

Further, concern for the environment came to the forefront with the passage of the Endangered Species and Clean Water acts in the 1970s. With many of our highways located near rivers and streams because these flat areas made for easier construction, we face unique environmental concerns because of abrasive run-off.

Similarly, we've had to look at how the use of abrasives affects air quality because of Clean Air Act mandates on the maximum amount of particulate material (PM-10) that can be suspended in the air. When the measured amount of particulates in the air exceeds the standards for a community, that community reaches "non-attainment," which means that it does not meet air quality standards. We currently have ten Montana communities in non-attainment status and another six on the verge of reaching non-attainment.

As if the health concerns associated with non-attainment aren't enough, MDT faces an additional challenge in non-attainment communities: federal highway funds can be used on a project only after we document that MDT's transportation program, the area transportation plan and the project all conform to Clean Air Act requirements. If we fail to do this, federal funds cannot be used on the project, which can ultimately jeopardize the public, either through increased costs to the local government or through our inability to complete a project.

As you can see, many issues affect our winter maintenance program, and we're moving forward based on those concerns. We are constantly reviewing our practices and researching winter maintenance options. This includes working with other states and manufacturers to find more viable options for winter maintenance chemicals. (To date, we've experimented with sugar beet derivatives and a corn-based de-icer but with less than desirable results.) Our focus is to serve

the public by providing a transportation system and services that emphasize quality, safety, cost effectiveness, economic vitality and sensitivity to the environment, and we will do everything in our power to provide the best winter maintenance program possible. After all, that's the only way we can stay "on track," not just with MDT, but also with the needs of our traveling public.

Dave Galt
Director